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TEACHER EDUCATION FOR SINGLE-GRADE TEACHING DISQUALIFIES MULTI-GRADE TEACHING FOR RURAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper examined the collision of teacher education for single-grade teacher classroom practices with multi-grade classroom teaching. Teachers educated for the normal situation of single-grade classroom teaching are not linked to the competencies required to practice and teach multi-grade classrooms. Of the current models of teacher education, none pays attention to the multi-grade teaching of rural education but only focuses on monograde classroom teaching. The paper used a qualitative research methodology. The researchers felt it vital to use a qualitative approach as the paper studies the life experiences of teachers in their natural and context-specific

settings. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because of their common defining characteristics in the problem under study. Data collection came through semi-structured interviews and observation. When analysing data, a narrative analysis was used. The results of this paper indicated that the current crop of teachers in multi-grade schools does not possess the pedagogical knowledge required. This finding concludes that teachers have no specialised knowledge that would improve learner outcomes from the quality of teaching workforce and the quality of teaching.

Keywords

Teacher Education, Single-Grade Teaching, Multi-Grade Teaching, Rural, Education

1. Introduction

The model of teacher professional development in South Africa commonly known as Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is a programme of teacher education that develops rural teachers for single-grade teaching (Education, 2015). Such a model excludes schools and teachers who belong to multi-grade schools. It should be noted that the CPD programme plays a significant role in education as it is the only available programme for quality education (Campbell & Elliot, 2013, as cited in Bartleton, 2018). Yet, it is regrettable that such a CPD programme focuses only on one angle of teacher practices, single-grade teaching. Researchers consider that a well-designed and organised CPD programme, well-structured CPD and that is not stereotypically designed can lead to successful changes in teachers' practices (Pedder & Opfer, 2010), as cited in Bartleton, 2018).

Notably is the fact that changes in the education system in South Africa are the initiatives that include improving both urban and rural schooling. One of the main focuses of these new changes and developments is to improve the education of teachers with the sole intention to make them fit in the given situation of multi-grade teaching as articulated in the education ministry report (DBE, 2014). However, rural schools are mostly faced with unique challenges during these tumultuous changes in the education of the country. In this instance, there are specific development needs, one of which is to deal effectively with multi-grade classrooms and a curriculum that is based on a single-grade structure (DBE, 2015). The situation remains as is even though the DBE (2014) highlighted teacher education in place does not provide teachers in multi-grade schools with the necessary teaching strategies and methods required for such a cause. In addition, Engin

(2018) argued that teachers lack skills in skills in managing different content at different levels and the implementation of the curriculum is therefore largely compromised.

Resulting of the absence of professional development for multi-grade schools is the fact that these multi-grade schools have a negative impact on the quality of learning and teaching and learner performance due to the challenges that teachers encounter in the implementation of the curriculum (Naparana & Alinsug, 2021). This notion attests that quality teaching and learning will come to the fore only if the plight of multi-grade schooling is taken seriously (Joubert, 2010) by the government. To ascertain that this practice is made viable for functional teaching and learning, the government needs to consider the revision of policies whereby teachers would be trained and be capacitated to handle multi-grade classrooms. This statement is in line with Naparana (2021) who argues that multi-grade teachers need to be equipped with a wide range of techniques and strategies likely to augment skills and abilities in learners. Multi-grade teaching provides and creates opportunities for learners in rural and farm schools to access education and to enhance their economic, health, and social opportunities. Multi-grade schooling has implications for both teacher training and curriculum design.

Rural schools have no second option for multi-grade classes because of the shortage of teachers in schools, emanating from the teacher rationalisation programme. Such a situation forced schools to combine different classes in the same classroom being taught by one teacher (Joubert, 2010). One vital concern is that multi-grade schools have no hope of ever being taught and developed to work under such situations (Kivunja (2014). The only available teacher education in South Africa is mono-grade teaching which denies teachers the knowledge required for multi-grade education. Almost all teachers at these schools have been trained in single-grade teaching approaches. This is the dilemma that puts a strain on teachers and leads them to believe that teaching in multi-grade schools is more demanding and difficult when compared to other sectors of education (Joubert, 2010).

However, Quail and Smyth (2014) note that teachers allocated in multi-grade classroom environments perceive it as challenging as there is a need for them to embark on using varieties of instructional resources coupled with activities likely to be accommodative to dissimilar learner needs of different grades, levels or ages, yet all these characteristics encompassed in one single classroom. On the same notion, learners enrolled for lower levels of study require teaching and learning resources relevant to their age cohort. Meaning, that mixing varying levels and age groups

in one single classroom might pose challenges to the intended output. Irrespective of such assorted combinations, research has observed that strategies to be implemented be noted as well, inclusive of highly considering learner heterogeneity (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015). Teachers need to take into cognisance that multi-grade classrooms have been noted for their characteristics to comprise different learner types who have varying learning styles and learning abilities. For teachers to be able to handle such differences, they need to apply unique skills, talents, wisdom and approaches to identifying learners who possess special characteristics to act as mentors to other learners. As authors of this paper, we already believe that other learners are more intellectually gifted than others. They need exposure to be granted some opportunities to mentor and facilitate learning, thus, engaging in information sharing logistics with the rest of the class members as their peers (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015).

On the bright future of multi-grade teaching, Berry (2010) as cited in Kavunja (2014) contends that multi-grade teaching can be an answer to quality teaching and learning where there's a shortage of teachers due to small enrolments, particularly in rural schools. Echoing these sentiments, Juvane (2007) attest that the success of multi-grade teaching and learning will only come from effective teacher education. Furthermore, OECD (2012) recognises quality education as coming from a formally organised system of education that is aimed at providing the required positive objectives. In fact, teacher education that is capable of working successfully is the that that looks at the needs of the community and thereby provides answers to the challenges that exist. Teacher education must therefore be a continuous process that seeks to change the attitude of teachers and beliefs towards the challenge they are faced with (Ko et. al., 2016). It is in this regard that the researchers ask themselves why there is no mention of multi-grade education in policy documents of the department of education (Joubert, 2009).

2. Theoretical Framework

This study was underpinned by Taleb's (2016) Procrustean Bed theory. According to the theory, the concept of Procrustes is based on a Greek Mythology where travellers were provided with a bed and had to adjust themselves to the given situation because they have no other alternative. In other words, one has to do something extraordinary and challenged themselves to fit in a given situation.

In relation to multi-grade classes, multi-grade education was made with the intentions of assisting schools that lack resources, and most importantly, the shortage of teachers. This means that schools had no other choices other than to combine different classes in a single classroom for education to take place. Multi-grade schools are therefore using every endeavour to let education takes place even in disadvantaged rural schools. In all these challenging situations, teachers had to use different teaching strategies in order to cope with the needs of learners. In a sense, multi-grade schools do everything to accomplish teaching and learning in multi-grade schools with the sole mandate to educate the disadvantaged school communities.

The Procrustean Bed theory by Taleb (2016) is in line with the Scaffolding Theory of Vygotsky as cited by (Smagorinsky, 2018). Scaffolding Theory has been proven for its effectiveness in a diverse classroom environment as is the same case of diversity experienced by teachers teaching in multi-grade setups. To reap good fruits in a multi-grade environment, teachers had to ensure the maintenance of teamwork, learner relations, teacher-learner relations, as well as cooperation. If these are taken into full consideration, not by teachers only, but by all the school stakeholders, heterogeneity that prevails in multi-grade environments would be acknowledged, thereby leading to collaboration and accomplishment towards improved academic throughput rate.

3. Methodology

This study was guided by a qualitative research methodology. The study focused on two (02) primary school teachers teaching in the Intermediate phase from two different schools. Participants were selected through purposive sampling where Dale (2006) posits that participants are selected through purposive sampling because of their common defining characteristics in the problem under study. The criterion for selecting schools was that they are both multi-grade schools and have multi-grade classes in the Intermediate phase. With grade 6 in both schools being an exit level for the Intermediate phase, their pass rate was far below the required progression requirement according to the information received from the district office. That information served as an additional criterion for selecting the two schools. Data collection came was through the use of semi-structured interviews and observation. Interviews were conducted during free periods through in-depth individual face-to-face interaction and observations were conducted while teachers were teaching in their classrooms.

According to Henning et al. (2009) the use of data from a variety of sources gives balance to the data collected. Interviews were recorded whilst taking notes at the same time and observations were video recorded upon getting consent from the participants. There was a correlation between the two methods of data collection as noted by (Cresswell, 2012).

4. Research Issues

Hence, the authors of this paper had the main objective to establish the classroom strategies that could be of benefit when implemented by teachers who lacked the training to handle multi-grade classes, as they were specifically trained to teach single-grade classes. Henceforth, we were then prompted to dig deep towards identifying relevant strategies for effective and efficient academic attainment of learners who were in the predicament of seeing themselves as bound to be attending classes in a multi-grade format. As authors we had the main intention to accumulate points of view in relation to multi-grade teacher experiences about approaches they used, thereby, our investigation leading to benchmarking strategies that would cater for and improve multi-grade teaching and learning processes.

5. Findings

The study found that teachers in multi-grade schools had difficulty regarding the definitions of multi-grade teaching. According to the researchers, a common definition is that:

“Multi-grade teaching is where a teacher in a school is teaching two or more grades with all the learning areas in the same classroom (Cornish, 2014). This situation is mostly found in rural areas that are in the periphery of the land, far from town with all the characteristics of a poor environment, hence rural education”.

5.1. Teaching Strategies

Teaching in the classroom is purely teacher-centred with little or no involvement of learners. A little involvement is only when learners have to repeat reading after what the teacher has said. Such a stance simple leads to poor communication between the teacher and learners as learners are not well developed with communication skills. In other words, the method of teaching used lacks quality teaching and learning on the part of quality education. It should be noted that communication is a vital tool in the teaching and learning situation.

5.2. Teacher Motivation

With the responses from teacher interviews and observations, multi-grade teachers are not motivated to do their work. The reason is that the work of teaching more than one classroom at the same time is far more demanding than anything close to mono-grade teaching. With more responsibilities in a difficult environment, competent teachers are of vital importance in this regard. All the teachers interviewed indicated that there are no district office or departmental workshops to develop them on how to teach in multi-grade classes. The only available workshops are those of single-grade teaching. This is a cascade model of development that is single-sided and does not meet the needs of both teachers and learners. Frustration and demotivation then come in the wake of teachers not being supported to face multi-grade teaching and learning. This leads to teachers developing a clear perception that the education authorities lack interest in their schools.

5.3. The Curriculum Taught at School

The curriculum that is taught in schools does not have any provision for multi-grade teaching. Multi-grade teachers are expected to teach as if they are teaching in a normal single-grade classroom. Classrooms, where teaching takes place, are designed for single-grade classes with not enough space, neglecting the current environment of multi-grade classes. South African teachers are using the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which was produced for monograde teaching. Contrary to multi-grade teaching, teachers are taught and developed to work along the lines of monograde teaching yet they are in a different space. (DBE, 2015).

5.4. School Resources

The infrastructure is generally poor. In the absence of resources, the needs of multi-grade schools are not addressed. Teachers are not well developed according to their needs and the situation they are in. In this instance, these multi-grade schools lack teacher effectiveness as teacher effectiveness refers to the focus on learner outcomes and the teacher behaviours and classroom processes that promote better learner outcomes (Ko et. al., 2016; Mpahla & Makena, 2020).

6. Conclusion

Multi-grade classes are organised as a matter of necessity for rural education where school enrolment does not meet the required learner teacher ratios. Such instances allow opportunities for multi-grade classes to exist and function under difficult education conditions. Multi-grade teaching is seen by the department of education as the only available vehicle to assist teachers facing rural

education challenges such as teacher shortages and budget constraints but with no support being given. Findings to this investigation could not be generalized and this became a limitation as not all teachers from the investigated school were participants to this study, therefore, findings that emerged were in line with the case under study as per the criterion used to select the studied school was guided by the nature of the school offering both multi and single grade in one schooling environment. Lack of support puts a strain on additional preparation on the part of the teacher and the situation leads to teacher frustrations and demoralization. Henceforth, future research could focus on motivation strategies for implementation as a way to capacitate teachers previously trained to handle single-grade classes.

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